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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRAGUE 000727

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: THE TROUBLEMAKERS PREPARE TO ASSUME THE EU
PRESIDENCY

REF: A. SADOWSKA-BLAHA E-MAIL DATED NOVEMBER 18
[1](#)B. PRAGUE DAILY NOVEMBER 12
[1](#)C. PRAGUE 704
[1](#)D. PRAGUE 681
[1](#)E. PRAGUE DAILY NOVEMBER 4
[1](#)F. PRAGUE 666

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Mary Thompson-Jones for reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: While both proud and abashed to be known as the "troublemakers" for speaking their mind and occasionally standing alone among the EU member states, the Czech government over the last several months has worked hard to change this perception to one of a serious and responsible EU member. While they have not changed their beliefs or principles, the Czechs have quietly devoted serious attention to preparations for assuming their upcoming leadership of the EU and tried to avoid making waves with EU partners. Similar to many previous EU Presidencies, the Czechs have divided the labor between Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra's office (internal Czech Ministry coordination) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (EU Presidency coordination with external partners). Czech preparations continue apace, but it is readily obvious that in light of the recent regional and senate elections (Ref D-F), the current GOCR coalition led by PM Topolánek faces a number of domestic political challenges over the next two months. These challenges may make for a rocky start to the January 1, 2009 Czech EU Presidency, especially if there are -- as stated by the PM -- changes in certain GOCR ministries. END SUMMARY.

Czech EU Presidency: Organization and Priorities

[1](#)2. (SBU) Within the GOCR, Deputy Prime Minister Alexandr Vondra's office is responsible for internal Czech Ministry coordination (rather analogous to the USG's NSC) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for EU Presidency coordination with external partners. So far, there have been no major bureaucratic problems regarding the development of their EU Presidency agenda, which is focused on: EU Competitiveness, EU Energy Security and Sustainability, and External Relations (Transatlantic Relations, the Western Balkans, and the EU's Eastern Neighborhood Policy). When it comes to Transatlantic Relations, the Czechs are enthusiastic proponents of an ever closer relationship with the U.S., and they are particularly eager to be leading the EU during the USG transition period. This Czech enthusiasm is likely to mean that the Czechs will zealously court U.S. engagement on a range of issues.

Czech EU Players: Vondra and Schwarzenberg

[1](#)3. (C) While the division of labor between FM Schwarzenberg and DPM Vondra makes sense on paper, and they have a close working relationship, in practice there is likely to be a

fair bit of overlap. While FM Schwarzenberg engages in the details of certain subjects (Burma, Cuba and the Balkans readily come to mind), he tends to take a hands-off approach to many other topics, leaving the details in the capable hands of his Deputy, Tomas Pojar, and Political Director, Martin Povejsil. As some close Czech MFA contacts have pointed out, this has led to some early coordination difficulties (both internally and externally) with respect to Czech policy on Russia. Whereas the MFA has pushed a fairly tough line on Russia, the Czech Ministry of Industry and Trade (MIT) has been reluctant to appear to be provoking Russia and has dragged its feet on the planned "Southern Corridor" meeting on energy security. According to these same contacts, Schwarzenberg has been "too much of a gentleman" to push his colleagues at MIT too hard, even when it is necessary, and he has also been reluctant to make calls (to people like French FM Kouchner or Swedish FM Bildt) when requested by his staff.

¶4. (C) By contrast, DPM Vondra engages readily on all manner of topics, particularly in the area of transatlantic relations. Thus, while Vondra's EU Policy Coordination office has responsibility for defining and shaping the direction of the Czech EU Presidency with other GOCR ministries, we can expect that this office, and likely Vondra himself, will assume a role that goes beyond Vondra's position description. Indeed, DPM Vondra, who served as Czech Ambassador to the U.S. in the late 1990s, visited the U.S. the week of November 17 for early consultations with contacts with links to the Obama transition team, as well as Defense Secretary Gates accompanied by staff from his office and that of the Czech MFA.

PM Topolanek: Preoccupied with Domestic Challenges

¶5. (C) Prime Minister Topolanek has been preparing for the EU Presidency for months. In July he hosted an "off-site" on what makes for a successful EU Presidency with his cabinet, other key GOCR officials, and officials from Brussels. Nevertheless, the Czech domestic political scene has consumed much of PM Topolanek's time recently, and will continue to do so at the very least until the ruling Civic Democratic Party (ODS) congress in early December. This is because Topolanek's ODS party suffered major blows in the October Senate and regional elections, which prompted talk of early elections and the downfall of the PM. Things remain tense but stable now within the coalition as there are signs that the GOCR and Social Democrats (CSSD) may be able to put the needs of the state above party politics.

¶6. (C) PM Topolanek and CSSD leader Jiri Paroubek have met twice recently to discuss the EU Presidency. This is noteworthy because the last time the two leaders met in private was December 2007. DPM Vondra told Ambassador Graber after the first of these meetings that it was clear the GOCR would have to communicate and, if possible, cooperate with CSSD. Subsequently, Paroubek stated that he would be prepared to "tolerate" the Topolanek government during the Czech EU Presidency if the GOCR did not make any "big mistakes." During a November 18 meeting with Defense Secretary Gates, DPM Vondra predicted that the PM and Paroubek would agree on some arrangement to facilitate coordination between the GOCR and opposition on issues relating to the Czech EU presidency.

¶7. (C) It appears that PM Topolanek and Paroubek are inching toward a political deal, which according to press reports, will be hammered out by DPM Vondra and CSSD Shadow Foreign Minister Lubomir Zaoralek. If PM Topolanek and Paroubek do reach an accord, and if Topolanek is able to fend off the challenges within the ODS for the party leadership, Topolanek would then be able to turn his attention to leading the Czech EU Presidency. While acknowledged big "ifs" at the moment, Topolanek appears to have strengthened markedly his position in recent days. He is a skillful politician and still in control of key levers of political power. If however, he does not succeed in the ODS race, possible scenarios include

PM Topolanek continuing as premier, but not ODS chairman; a newly reconstituted coalition government under a new premier; and a technocratic government with early elections. The last two of which, could make it difficult for the Czechs to credibly lead the EU.

The Wild Cards: Klaus and Paroubek

¶8. (C) For opposition leader Paroubek, what constitutes "tolerance" and "big mistakes" are clearly two terms open to interpretation, and Paroubek is a politician who pays attention to his own interests. Thus, it is unclear how long his "tolerance" will last, or even what the PM may have agreed to in order to achieve this. If this truce crumbles, the opposition could keep the coalition occupied on the domestic front, thereby hampering the GOCR's ability to act at the EU level.

¶9. (C) Czech Head of State President Vaclav Klaus is perhaps the most dangerous wild card and distraction for the ruling coalition. While President Klaus and PM Topolanek are both of the ODS party, which leads the coalition government, they have been at loggerheads for years both over political and policy issues. Klaus is a notable euroskeptic who does not shy away from controversy or publicity. He courted both on his recent state visit to Ireland, where he met with anti-Lisbon treaty movement head Declan Ganley and held a joint press conference in which Klaus referred to both himself and Ganley as dissidents within the EU. When this prompted Irish FM Martin to accuse Klaus of unseemly and "inappropriate" remarks, Klaus shot back calling the FM's comments "hypocrisy." While most Czech dailies reference this row as yet another example of "Klaus being Klaus," his euroskepticism complicates things for the coalition government. The GOCR will need to walk a fine line in order to calm the fears of EU member states that wonder about the Czechs' ability to lead the EU, and the Czech domestic audience, which wonders if Klaus well might be right to treat the EU with a measure of skepticism. (Note: As one example, over 50 percent of the Czech public opposes the Lisbon Treaty, which is not well understood here. End Note.)

Lisbon Treaty: Ratification Unlikely by Czech EU Presidency Start

¶10. (C) While Czech Constitutional Court officials indicated this summer that they planned to render a decision on the constitutional challenge to the Lisbon Treaty in mid-September, this soon changed to November 10 (after Czech regional and Senate elections). This then changed again, to November 25, so that President Vaclav Klaus, who submitted a brief in the case, may attend the public hearing. While GOCR officials still anticipate that the court will decide that the Lisbon Treaty does not contravene the Czech Constitution, the treaty will still need to be approved by both chambers of parliament and signed by President Klaus in order to be ratified.

¶11. (C) While the Czechs have been under constant pressure from EU member states such as Germany and France to ratify this document before the end of the year, DPM Vondra has gone to great lengths to publicly emphasize that whether or not the Czechs ratify the treaty by January 1 would have no impact on the functioning of the EU until all of the EU member states ratify it. (Note: A select number of EU member states, most notably Ireland, have yet to do so. End Note.) Perhaps to temper expectations as well as to appear to be an EU team player, Vondra stated in Paris earlier this month that it would be good for at least one of the two Czech chambers of parliament to vote on it prior to the start of the EU Presidency.

The French Connection

¶12. (C) On October 21, when French President Sarkozy outlined his ideas on the creation of a robust "economic government" composed of the 15 Eurozone members (Note: the Czechs are not members), there was a flurry of Czech press speculation that Sarkozy was attempting a power grab. The Sarkozy plan as outlined would, by the very nature of the Eurozone, exclude most of Eastern Europe, and perhaps lead to the dreaded "two-track" Europe, leaving behind many of the smaller European economies. However, during PM Topolanek's October visit to Paris, Sarkozy made clear publicly that he would not call for any Eurozone summits during the Czech Presidency. He also took pains with the media to dispel the idea that he wants to extend the French Presidency beyond December 31. Nevertheless, Sarkozy's has yet again stepped into the limelight and ruffled feathers with Czech officials for his public statements proposing a January 8-9 economic summit related to the global financial crisis.

¶13. (C) Thus, Czech officials anticipate that the French will try to remain engaged in presidency matters next year. The Czechs believe that some other probable areas of French engagement are Iran, Africa, and European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP). The Czechs have a limited number of Embassies in Africa, and thus their ability to engage or report in certain regions is limited. When it comes to the highly sensitive nature of EU relations with Iran, the Czechs are also hamstrung, given that they are represented only at the charge level in Tehran (Note: Iran has yet to approve any of the Czechs several requests for agreement in the last decade. End Note.) Czech DFM Tomas Pojar told visiting USDP Edelman in October that in this area the Czechs would probably accede to having the French (who have an ambassador in Tehran) continue to represent the EU in Tehran during the Czech presidency.

The Known Unknowns

¶14. (C) While Topolanek has indicated that he plans to make changes in his cabinet, what those changes will be or how deep they will go is mere conjecture at this point. Health Minister Julinek, Agriculture Minister Gandalovic, and Justice Minister Pospisil regularly feature in the Czech press as possible Ministers to go, but this is only speculation at the moment. It is unclear when and if such changes will occur, as much will depend on the results of the ODS party congress December 5-7. What this means for the EU Presidency is that there may be new people assuming leadership of certain ministries only weeks before the start of the Czech Presidency. Our regular and sustained engagement with both the MFA and the DPM's office will thus be critical as we strive to advance transatlantic relations on a range of topics.

Graber